



ALPHABET SPECIAL passes through Washington, D. C. Don Phillips photo.

Learning the alphabet

I SOME LOCAL RESIDENTS thought it was an Amtrak train. Many, of course, were completely unaware of its existence, and thus were mystified when they chanced to see it. "It" was a seven-car passenger train powered by two Alco PA1 diesels.

In connection with our study of the Northeast Rail Reorganization Act . . . we are planning a joint B&M-D&H inspection trip by special train, utilizing D&H equipment, over the B&M-D&H-LV-RDG-B&O route of symbol trains NE-84 and NE-87, from Rigby Yard, Portland, Me., to Potomac Yard, Va., March 19, 20, and 21, 1974. The purpose of the trip will be to afford various officials of the U. S. Department of Transportation, Interstate Commerce Commission, and the states of New York, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts an opportunity to inspect this North-South service route referred to as the Northeast Alphabet Route and familiarize those aboard with the physical characteristics, clearances, and other operating advantages versus possible alternate routes. Key representatives from all the railroads involved will be aboard. . . .

So read the text of an invitation to TRAINS from the Delaware & Hudson Railway. And so it was I ventured into the south end of Rigby Yard on that cloudy Tuesday, March 19, 1974, to find the PA's and their seven cars seemingly hiding on a storage track adjacent to a service road — but ready to go. Only a few knowledgeable local railfan photographers mingled with the railroaders, consultants, and Government people who would be aboard. Behind Alcos 18 and 17 were baggage car 53; coaches 31, 220, and 32; lounge car 43; and business cars 500 and 200. A right smart-looking consist. We departed into gathering snowflakes promptly at 8 a.m.

ConRail. Amtrak. Lineside industries. Passenger service. Shipments per month. Subsidy. Track condition. You name it — if a topic was related to railroading today in the Northeast, it was discussed. Informally, in pairs or small groups, over continental breakfasts or box lunches, we talked, we learned, and, yes, we took pictures or simply looked out the window, taking in what to me was (outside of D&H) new track and new territory. As we went along, representatives of the road we were traversing narrated from the "communication booth" in instruction coach 220 (an old B&A commuter car) over the PA system significant facts about our current location. What better way to get away from phone calls and deadlines and learn about a significant railroad route than to ride over it, be handed printed material, and be continually fed verbally all your answers — before you thought of some of the questions.

The show on the first day was Boston & Maine's: Rigby, Dover, Exeter, Lawrence, Lowell, Ayer, Fitchburg, East Deerfield, Greenfield, North Adams, Mechanicville. We glided at 40 mph along surprisingly good track of mostly 112-pound rail. Count of freights passed for the day: five,

including 107-car NE-84, our opposite-direction alphabet-ter. Highlight of the route: Hoosac Tunnel, of course — 22 minutes at restricted speed. During the passage the tiered observation room of car 200 was crowded as John Barriger of FRA (and late of B&M, of course) held forth on the care and feeding of a century-old 25,081-foot-long tunnel.

Day No. 2, Wednesday, was sunny, relaxing, uncrowded, and scenic as we rode over D&H and LV rails: Mechanicville, Oneonta, Carbondale, Scranton, Lehighton, Bethlehem. This bridge portion of the Northeast Alphabet route is faster than B&M with better rail, but it is a bridge portion — lineside shippers are fewer in number, and so the PA system was quieter. We paid homage to Starrucca Viaduct with a stop beneath it for photos; we changed crews at Moosic, Pa., just north of Dupont, where D&H and LV built a new Alphabet interchange track. In the spectacular Lehigh River valley, we clipped and curved along at 45; and then — then we did something I would have thought impossible in this day of red ink and rotted ties: We held a steady 60 per down the bankrupt LV on excellent track. I would guess our veteran engineer remembered his Cornell red PA's and what they could do.

Thursday brought rain on the Reading as we returned to urban territory and got back onto passenger track; Allentown, Reading (around, not through), Pottstown, Philadelphia, Wilmington, Baltimore, Washington, and Potomac Yard. We were in revenue country again, but we saw some of the what's-wrongs in the East: Reading's short-haul and circuitous portion of our Alphabet Route — albeit over good track; B&O's awkwardly situated East Side yard in Philly; and today's Royal Blue route south of there. The B&O line is single-tracked, crowded, and rough — rough from the pounding of many trains. (On March 21 almost every siding was filled. Admittedly, a few trains simply had been delayed waiting for our passage.) Take freight off PC's Northeast Corridor? To where? North of Baltimore, there seems to be no room in Chessie's food dish.

Item: For the 47 days preceding our trip, NE-87 was delivered by Reading to Chessie at Park Junction, Philadelphia, on time only once. Further, the train in the same period arrived at Potomac Yard from 1 hour 2 minutes late to 13 hours 53 minutes late — and never on time or ahead of schedule. Eastbound counterpart NE-84 left Pot Yard late on 36 days out of 47 and was delivered to RDG late on 45 occasions.

The sun broke through at Baltimore to add sparkle to the windup of our 809-mile three-day Northeast lesson. Crews changed adjacent to Camden Station; we passed almost unnoticed over Thomas Viaduct (only one lineside photographer recorded the move; were D&H 18 and 17 the first PA's to cross the viaduct?); we climbed down off high iron at JD tower in Hyattsville and moved over on slow track to PC's freight line at Anacostia Junction tower; we smoked up the overhead through Washington, passed Amtrak headquarters (yes, we were saluted), and crossed the Potomac (the first PA's since Southern's and in company of few others, such as Freedom Train's unit, ever to grace Virginia soil). We raced the *Silver Star* into Pot Yard and at 4:05 p.m. tied up behind the engine terminal full of RF&P and B&O diesels and PC electrics. Somehow the PA's looked right at home.

This summer, Bruce Sterzing's PA's have been or will be busy hauling excursions on line and off line, helping to keep D&H at the fore in the minds of rail enthusiasts weary of black diesels, red ink, and Government-run passenger trains. But PA's and intercity passenger cars are nice to have around too when you have a message to tell to those railroad supporters who more directly control your future — the people in the halls of Government to whom the rails unfortunately have not been able to get their message across.

The Northeast Alphabet route may be only a fledgling alternative to the Northeast Corridor (NE-84 and NE-87 are yarded for several hours at Allentown and Mechanicville, and only D&H-LV and RDG-B&O pool motive power), but it is a viable route. And thanks to the initiative of B&M and D&H, more of us now know it's there. — J.D.I.